

# REGIONAL SUMMER SCHOOLS: WIDENING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH INTENSIVE COURSES

**Bronwyn Ellis and Janet Sawyer**

*Centre for Rural Health and Community Development  
University of South Australia*

## ABSTRACT

*While many universities now include summer school and other intensive courses as part of their annual programme offerings, undergraduate summer school courses were initiated in one South Australian university by its regional campus. Originally designed to give students who had failed a course the opportunity to catch up, they also enabled students to fast-track their degree, or lighten the workload for a subsequent study period, and provided these students with a distinctive learning experience. Despite much informal favourable feedback from both local students and metropolitan students who have availed themselves of this opportunity, there had not been a formal evaluation of the effectiveness of these regional summer schools, in comparison with the usual delivery modes, prior to the study described in this paper. The positives of the regional campus summer school are demonstrated in these results.*

## INTRODUCTION

Summer schools and intensive courses of various kinds have been available for some time to the students of various universities, giving students the chance to make up for failures, fast-track their studies, or allow them to have a lighter workload in a contiguous semester/study period. This paper outlines various intensive course delivery contexts, both national and international, and describes an investigation into the effectiveness of learning via summer schools offered at a regional university campus. It also provides useful information to guide other institutions that may be contemplating the introduction of similar modes of course delivery.

## INTENSIVE COURSE DELIVERY

Tertiary intensive courses are by no means new: there are some nineteenth century United States examples. Other US developments are described by Conrad (1990), including responses to economic conditions during the Depression and later government pressures for accelerated completions. An early summer school course in Australia was a Geology summer school offered by the University of Tasmania from 1970 (Duke, 1970). Some universities and other organisations have offered summer schools in enrichment courses, unconnected with formal university awards. Universities have also run bridging or other special programmes; for example, to prepare students lacking sufficient mathematics or science knowledge prerequisite

for certain study areas. However, the focus of our study was the delivery at summer school of undergraduate courses that are core components of an award programme.

The effectiveness of intensive learning was investigated in another summer school situation in the early 1990s, also with business students (Inglis, Broadbent & Dall'Alba, 1992). That report, which also includes background on earlier intensive learning examples and related studies, tested students before and after a summer school management accounting course to determine their development of understanding in a particular topic, and found that the summer school students exhibited a greater change to a higher level of understanding than the regular semester students. Those researchers also found that students who took that course at summer school and the other three courses during the semester achieved better grades in all four courses than their peers who took the four courses during the semester.

Students' perceptions of their learning in an intensive summer school course were found to be favourable in a Griffith University study, which used questionnaires both at the end of the course and a retrospective one a semester later (Conrad, 1990). Conrad found little research available on "the relationship between intensity and learning or teaching effectiveness in non-language higher education courses leading to degree programmes", but what there was generally supported "the educational soundness of concentrated programs" (Conrad, 1990, p. 55).

While an intensive course usually means that students have to absorb multiple new concepts fairly quickly, it is possible to present these in a meaningful context, using real-life scenarios and examples, and enabling students to build on prior knowledge and experience and "effectively to exploit their own existing knowledge as an ideational and organizational matrix for the incorporation, understanding, retention, and organization of large bodies of new ideas" (Ausubel, 2000, p. 77) – new and old interact, with each being modified as the new is assimilated by students who are motivated to learn (Ausubel, 2000). As "learning is inherently an interdependent, sociolinguistic process" (Bruffee, 1993, p. 10), it is facilitated by a situation where students have ample opportunity to learn together, discussing problems, supporting each other, re-engaging with the content after class; these opportunities for collaborative learning are enhanced in intensive learning situations.

By identifying and exploring factors that assist students to be successful in intensive courses, practices facilitating this can be reinforced; on the other hand, negatives identified can indicate directions in which to improve such courses (Mason & Morgan, 1986; Nicodemus, 1992). This will help to improve the quality of the student experience, increasing satisfaction and contributing to improved retention and completion rates. Word-of-mouth marketing will also be positive (Sanders & Burton, 1996).

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

The Whyalla Campus (now part of the Centre for Regional Engagement) of the University of South Australia initiated the teaching of Introduction to Law during the summer vacation at the beginning of 1996. While there are now many courses offered within the wider university during the teaching breaks, this was a

pioneer effort and characterised by its intensive nature. Following the success of the Law summer school, in 1998 a Statistical Analysis for Business course was run in similar fashion. Both courses attracted students from the metropolitan area as well as local regional students, as neither course was offered intensively in Adelaide; a few students from other universities also attended. The Statistics course has also been run intensively at the Mount Gambier Regional Centre established at the beginning of 2005 in the south-east of the state. Another course, Entrepreneurial Enterprises, was introduced in the intensive mode in 2006. A one-off Group Work and Counselling/Social Interaction course was also run at summer school in 2002 and, more recently, intensive courses have been offered in Mediation: Processes, Concepts and Skills, and in Indigenous Australians and the Human Services. There are plans to extend the offerings to include the courses Enterprise and Business Creation, and Finance and Investment.

The two initial Whyalla summer school courses in Law and Statistics were run end-to-end, giving students from elsewhere the opportunity to attend both with minimal travelling. Formal classes ran throughout each day with the students often meeting informally in the evenings to further their discussions. The Statistics summer school ran from the Wednesday of one week in January until the Friday of the next, including the examination, and Law from a Monday until the Saturday of the following week, including the examination, both excluding weekends and the Australia Day public holiday. Statistics requirements concluded with the examination, but Law students still had to submit a final assignment two weeks later. In some earlier years the two courses were interleaved, with Law and Statistics on alternate days – very heavy for students taking both, but giving extra time for absorbing material for those doing just one course. In 2008, only the Statistics course was offered intensively.

Apart from the routine evaluations at the end of each course, there had been no formal investigation into students' perceptions of their Whyalla summer school experience before this study. An earlier paper (Ellis, Sawyer & Wilson, 2005) gave an overview of the whole study, with an emphasis on the qualitative data from student focus groups and staff interviews. This paper provides further detail and the insights gained from the open-ended question responses collected in the on-line surveys of the students. (See Appendix.)

## **AIMS OF THE RESEARCH**

The aims of this study were to:

- Evaluate the summer school learning environment;
- Gain access to students' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of this context; and
- Identify the particular characteristics of summer school at a regional campus.

It was also thought that valuable marketing information would be obtained.

## **METHOD**

Approval for the study was gained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. In October 2004 all students who had participated in the Whyalla summer schools held at the beginning of the years 2003 and 2004 were surveyed via an anonymous web-based questionnaire (Appendix) using the University's TellUs software (<http://www.unisa.edu.au/help/tellus2/>). They were asked to look back at their summer school experience and give their perceptions, making comparisons with their other modes of study. Most questions were open-ended, gathering rich qualitative data. The 2005 summer school participants were followed up likewise during the first semester of 2005, a few months after their summer school attendance. The 2005 students also had the opportunity to take part in a focus group held during free time during the days the summer school courses were operating.

### **Data analysis**

The notes of focus group discussions were analysed and summarised by the researchers. The survey data was automatically collated by TellUs, also including graphs of the quantitative results. The qualitative data were coded and tallied.

### **Participants**

Student focus group participants were four from the Statistics class and six from the Introduction to Law class. As attendance at summer school is an optional alternative for students, the population for both on-line surveys was self-selected. The response rate was 37.5% overall: 32.4% for the 2003/2004 summer school students (34 out of 105) and 51.3% for the 2005 groups (20 out of 39).

## **RESULTS**

The perceptions of students as revealed in student focus groups have been described in an earlier paper (Ellis, Sawyer & Wilson, 2005). What follows here is a summary of the online student surveys.

The majority of respondents to the online surveys were female (65%) and aged under 25 years (43%). Their usual campus was City West (72%) which houses the Division of Business. Twenty per cent were studying Law at summer school and 89% Statistics, some doing both courses; year of enrolment ranged from before 2001 to the current year. None had previously attempted the Law course, whereas 18 (37.5%) of the 48 studying Statistics were doing the course for the second time. Three-quarters of the respondents stayed in the on-campus accommodation. Table 1 provides a profile of the survey respondents (2004 and 2005 surveys combined).

**Table 1: Profile of Survey Respondents**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>N=54</b>	<b>% (rounded)*</b>
<b>Age</b>	<25	23	43
	25-34	15	28
	35-44	11	20
	>44	5	9
<b>Gender</b>	Female	35	65
	Male	19	35
<b>Usual campus</b>	Whyalla	9	17
	City West	39	72
	Other UniSA	4	7
	Other uni	2	4
<b>Course at summer school</b> (NB: some students did both.)	Law	11	20
	Statistics	48	89
<b>Year of enrolment in programme</b>	Before 2001	7	13
	2001	15	28
	2002	8	15
	2003	13	24
	2004	7	13
	2005	1	2
	Not stated	4	7
<b>Course previously attempted</b>	Law	0	0
	Statistics	18	33
<b>Stayed at the Student Village</b>	Yes	41	76
	No	13	24

\* Because of rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

While most survey questions, apart from those collecting demographic data, were open-ended, there were four closed questions (reported in Table 2). Of those students attending their first summer school, the majority (72%) indicated that they would attend another. When asked if the workload was more or less manageable with the summer school mode of delivery, nearly all the students (93%) indicated that it was more manageable than on a full semester basis. Most (91%) also believed that they retained what they had learned in the summer school. Thirty-one per cent of the students subsequently enrolled in a course for which the summer school course was a pre-requisite.

**Table 2:**  
**Student Responses to Closed Questions Relating to Summer School Learning**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>N=54</b>	<b>%</b>
If this was your first summer school, would you attend another?	Yes	39	72
	No	2	4
	No response	13	24
Do you feel that you retain what you learned in summer school?	Yes	49	91
	No	5	9
	No response	-	-
Was the workload more or less manageable with the summer school mode of delivery?	More manageable	50	93
		3	5
	Less manageable	1	2
	No response		
Did you subsequently enrol in a course for which the summer school one was a prerequisite?	Yes	17	31
	No	35	65
	No response	2	4

Qualitative data summarised below relate to motivation, ability to attend, learning at summer school, the regional campus as a study environment and further comments. (For ease of reading, minor spelling and punctuation corrections have been made to student comments quoted.)

### **Motivation**

Reasons given by the students for studying this course at summer school were varied, with some expressing multiple motivations. Some looked at the end result, while others indicated prior circumstances that had led them to enrol in summer school, such as hearing good reports from others who had attended previously. Yet other reasons were connected with the timing and aspects of the summer school learning environment. Table 3 summarises these:

**Table 3: Reasons for Studying the Course at Summer School**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Number mentioning (N=54)</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>Outcome:</i>		
Getting a course out of the way	17	32
Finish degree earlier	17	32
Catching up	12	22
Lighten semester load	4	7
Getting ahead	2	4
Make new friends	1	2
Get to know a new place	1	2
Needed prerequisite for postgraduate course	1	2
<i>Summer school situation:</i>		
Concentrate on one course	12	22
New study experience/approach	6	11
Easier to fit in with employment	6	11
Time off from normal responsibilities	4	7
Support from lecturer	3	6
Better understanding	2	4
Recall of topics - no time to forget	2	4
Support from peers	2	4
Family/friends in Whyalla	2	4
Friends also going	1	2
<i>Prior factors:</i>		
Word of mouth	10	19
Negative experience elsewhere	6	11
Opportunity was there	1	2
Had attended previously	1	2

It can be seen from Table 3 that the primary reason given by the students for studying the course at summer school was to complete their programme sooner. Comments expressing reasons to do with an expected outcome included: "shortening the length of time it will take to complete my degree", "to complete the course in summer, so I would be a subject ahead", "needed to catch up on one subject", "to lighten my study load during semester", and "to get a subject out of the way". Reasons relating to the summer school situation included being able to focus on one course: "I appreciated the opportunity to be able to tackle one whole course on an intensive basis and in a location away from other daily distractions", which for

another “would allow me to gain a better understanding, rather than doing the subject whilst also maintaining three other subjects”. The anticipated support of lecturer and peers in this intensive situation was also a factor for some; some had earlier experienced a “sink or swim” situation in large metropolitan classes, and not succeeded there. Many mentioned the favourable reports they had received from earlier participants in the Whyalla summer schools: “word of mouth, I heard of the subjects through other students and they said it was a good way to complete them”; “I decided to take up summer school in Whyalla because I had heard such positive reviews of students who had studied Stats there.” For some who were otherwise studying externally, summer school allowed them the new experience of internal university study. Some comments received from these students were: “I believed that the Intro to Law would be more rewarding and interesting if studied with other students as opposed to on my own”, and “a great chance to meet other people in the same position as me”.

### **Ability to attend**

One question related to the ability to fit the summer school course in with other work commitments. Thirty of the participants (55%) had to arrange to take time off work to attend the summer school, using leave of one type or another, one mentioning that this was unpaid leave. Another who was self-employed was able to take time off, but with consequent loss of income, and the husband of another student took leave to look after the children while she attended. The fact that the first school term began during the summer school was a difficulty for another student with young children, and another had to leave her baby with her parents as her husband’s work did not allow him to take time off to care for it. For those for whom it meant no income for a period, it was still “a better way to take two weeks off, rather than something over say ten weeks”, and another commented that it was easier to get two weeks’ leave than a longer period. Generally, the timing of the summer school in January/February was “perfect” as it was easier “to take time off work due to the Christmas/summer break” and annual leave was usually taken in this period. Overall, the course fitted in well with the students’ other work commitments and they found that it was a “good time of year”. For 12 students (22%) there were no other work commitments. Comments included:

*Time off from work; however, I also have young children and would not have been able to manage effectively if I did not have a very supportive family.*

*Sometimes sacrifices are needed, but that’s life.*

*I took time off, but it was such a short period of time my work didn’t suffer and I really found the break relaxing compared to my job.*



## Summer school learning

The open-ended questions on perceptions of the students' learning experience at summer school were:

- How did you find the intensive learning experience as compared with studying a course spread over a normal semester?
- What factors helped your learning at summer school?
- How do you rate the workload for the summer school course?
- How did you find the campus as a place to study effectively?

## Summer school learning compared with a semester-long course

While one student said that it was "too intensive" and another felt that another week or two would have helped, practically all responses were very favourable toward the intensive learning experience as compared with studying a course spread over a normal 16-week study period, describing it as "excellent", "challenging", and "enjoyable". Almost all said that it provided a better learning environment with "a good atmosphere" as "everybody was there because they wanted to be". There was more support, encouragement, a "ready-made study group" of other students, and ready availability of the lecturer, whose lecturing style was praised. The students reported that they were better able to focus on their studies, as they were concentrating on only one course, with daily contact and consequent continuity, and no distractions from work or family. Also, the information was easier to absorb, rather than being studied "in bits and pieces". Some of the themes are picked up again in the section below on factors assisting learning. Comments received included:

*Fantastic learning experience, would do it again without hesitation. Intensive group of students all focused on a common goal.*

*Much easier, not forgetting stuff from five weeks back and trying to figure out what it was, when working on assignments.*

*I found it a better way to carry out the course as I could retain more and only concentrate on one subject instead of changing subjects all the time.*

*Fantastic. Would heartily recommend it as a study mode. You must be prepared to immerse yourself in the subject matter though. It would have been very easy to fall behind and there would be no opportunity to catch up again.*

*Was very good. It was stressful at times, however I found I was able to absorb and retain more information than I normally would over a whole semester.*

A longer response was positive, but had reservations about the suitability of the format for all courses:

*I enjoyed it. I found it challenging but because of the intensive nature the information was repeated until it jelled. For a course which is not part of the major you are doing this style of learning is brilliant; however, if I was doing a law degree or a mathematics degree I feel the extended time of a semester course allows the information to be remembered but also conceptualised. This is something that only happens, I feel, with continued contemplation of a subject. However, I retained a lot of what I learnt and believe this was because of the nature of the learning experience.*

### Factors assisting learning at summer school

The majority referred to the lecturer/s as a factor helping their learning. The day-to-day contact was a key factor, as was the one-to-one interaction with the lecturer, made possible by the small class sizes. The lecturers were described as “excellent”, “patient”, “personable and approachable” and they “motivated” and “instilled confidence” in the students. The order in which the content was presented was also praised. The lectures were reported to be more interactive, and out-of-hours assistance was available. Students said that “to feel comfortable answering questions is a great advantage” and “the ability to go over things you didn’t understand at the time you got lost enabled me to learn and absorb rather than try and catch up later”. Camaraderie and the informal group learning situations fostered were helpful: “staff and student participation”, “the chance to interact with fellow students and ask their opinions”, “the community feeling that was enjoyed”, and “using everyone around you to get a better grasp”. The intensive mode, with “fewer distractions” (from other courses or outside influences), meant that it was easier to focus on studies. The on-campus accommodation was mentioned as a factor, along with easy access to resources, and external factors such as a supportive family or employer. Table 4 summarises the main factors, there being no doubt overlap between some.

**Table 4: Factors Assisting Learning**

Factor	Number mentioning (N=54)	%
Lecturer/s	38	70
Group learning	13	24
Interaction	12	22
Focus	12	22
Camaraderie	10	19

### Workload

In line with the favourable response to the quantitative question concerning workload manageability (in Table 2), student comments indicated that they felt that the workload was “realistic”, and not unexpected. The students rated the workload for the summer school course as “intense” but “do-able” and “about what I had

thought it would be". While it was "full on", it was generally believed that the work was "able to be completed in the time required if you studied" and that the workload was "manageable" and "acceptable", allowing adequate time for both study and relaxation. One commented that being able to stay in the on-campus accommodation helped, as it was so easy to ask questions of fellow students. Two students who had taken both courses found that the nature of the Law course meant a heavier workload than for Statistics. While one would have preferred the same workload spread over a longer period, there were no negative comments. Comments included:

*The workload was very balanced. There was enough work to justify being away from home but also enough time to socialise and get to know new people.*

*Massive but achievable with positive attitude.*

*It was realistic, not like during the semester where you have three other subjects to complete in addition to the work in Stats. I would do it 100 times over in summer school rather than during the semester.*

*I rated the workload as excellent. Intensive as the course was, we still had ample time to grasp the concepts.*

*Just right – enough to challenge and not to overwhelm.*

### **The regional campus as a study environment**

In general students found the campus "good" as a place to study effectively, with "a good learning atmosphere". They liked the fact that the on-campus accommodation was close to the lecture rooms and library and that "it isn't as spread out as the other campuses so it is easy to get from one place to the other". Having "people around to help and study groups were a good mode of studying" and it was "really good for comparing notes and meeting new people". Having a desk in the room at the Student Village also allowed private study. The computer pools and library were also praised, although the "limited hours of the library" were "inconvenient" and hindered the ability to "attain more information and data". While the cafeteria was not open at that time of year, students appreciated the provision of tea and biscuits etc. for breaks. One identified it as a "very safe" environment.

### **Further comments**

The final question in the survey asked for further comments on any aspect of their summer school experience. Many reiterated positives mentioned in response to earlier questions. The students said it was a "great experience", made better by having "an excellent lecturer" and other supportive staff; they would recommend it to other students, would do another course over summer themselves if "the opportunity comes up", and wished that more courses were offered at summer

school in Whyalla. It had meant “a good, productive summer”. They commented that “the accelerated programme worked a dream for me”, “that you can do an entire semester in just over a week is great”, and that the “accommodation was very good and very good value”. The students “felt welcome on the campus”, liked the facilities, and considered that the provision of shared lunches was “very thoughtful” and “brought the group closer together”. They appreciated the opportunity “to meet students from other campuses” and develop friendships that they considered would last a long time. The only “sore point” for some was the library hours, which they felt should cater for the summer school students, as they were the only ones studying on campus then. Another mentioned child care issues. The following story gives an indication of the impact of the summer school mode of study:

*I had previously attempted Stats ... and was told by my tutor to withdraw because I would fail as my maths was insufficient to pass which was very stressful as it is a core course. Whyalla was not easy by any stretch of the imagination. It was very intensive and hard work ... but not only did I pass I got a D [Distinction]. [The] teaching style coupled with the ability to block out day-to-day concerns through the isolation from my home (and kids) was the reason I now understand and use stats ... I went to Whyalla hoping to scrape by with a P2 [a minimum Pass]. I left with an understanding of Stats which I have even implemented into a recent report that I have written at work.*

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Response to the intensive courses**

The fact that almost three quarters of the participants who had been first-time attendees indicated that they would be interested in attending another summer school (Table 2) emphasises their overwhelmingly positive feelings about the experience. It is probable that the non-responses for that question were from people who were repeat attendees. Likewise, the assertion by almost all of them that they felt that they retained what they had learned implies that they felt that it had been a successful learning experience. The subsequent enrolment by about a third of them in a course for which the summer school one was a prerequisite is indicative of confidence in achieving the necessary grounding and/or retaining/acquiring interest in related courses. While the response rate for the first survey was low, this could be attributed to the fact that it was administered quite some time after the summer school experience of some of the participants; although we do not know whether the non-respondents were equally positive about their experience, it is reasonable to assume that some with negative feelings would have taken advantage of this anonymous survey opportunity to express them. The second survey, with its higher response rate, was administered in the middle of the semester immediately following the summer school.

Students with the motivation to enrol for summer school appear to maintain this commitment and complete the course. For about a third of the survey respondents, summer school provided an opportunity to make up for a previous failure in that course, and so they were covering the course material for a second

time. However, for the majority this was not the case, and so it would appear that some of the improvement in results can be attributed to factors provided by the Whyalla summer school learning environment. Teaching and learning effectiveness is influenced not only by the quality of teaching, resources and facilities, but also by a range of other factors such as group cohesion and interaction and rich learning relationships which summer school students in Whyalla have found in abundance. The beyond-the-classroom aspects of summer school have helped the development of camaraderie and a willingness to learn from each other. The availability of on-campus accommodation facilitated this, as well as ensuring that students had to spend minimal time travelling to their classes. The very intensity of the course fostered the linking of topics and ease of making meaningful connections with relevant applications, leading to the higher level of understanding mentioned by Inglis, Broadbent and Dall'Alba (1992). The positives of the intensive course delivery included the support and encouragement of the group and the ready availability of the lecturer, all of which created a motivating and "good" atmosphere in which to study and enjoy the benefits of collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1993), enhanced by the diversity of the students participating. Students were able to focus on their studies better, with fewer distractions, and gain from the increased interactive nature of the lectures – the fact that the classes were much smaller than the metropolitan ones that many of the students were accustomed to made it much easier for the lecturer to allow questions throughout the lecture time. This enabled the lecturer to check more easily that material had been grasped before proceeding to the next points. Lecturers were able to focus on one course, without the distraction of other course commitments. They also showed students their willingness to be available after class for individual and group questions by remaining on campus and providing off-campus telephone and e-mail contact details.

There were additional advantages for the general community in terms of economic benefits from the students' spending. The summer school also provided the opportunity for metropolitan students to experience life in the country. This is a significant potential advantage for the wider community, as attracting professionals to regional areas and retaining them is a key issue in local community development.

While the intensive nature of the courses meant that they were "full on", this was not generally identified as a negative as this commitment was not unexpected. The few negatives reported by the students included restricted library hours, child care difficulties, and a lack of cafeteria facilities at that time of the year. The current presence of a commercial café on campus, open to the general public as well as the University community, has improved this situation.

### **Recommendations for future summer schools**

The following recommendations refer to the Centre for Regional Engagement situation, but can be applied to other summer/winter school endeavours.

The teaching and learning needs of potential participants and particular course requirements need to be considered by organisers planning further summer schools or other intensive courses. While some courses may be appropriate for intensive delivery over two weeks or less, such a format for other courses involving a great deal of theory may prove overwhelming. With such courses, allowing rest

days between class days could make them more manageable – flexibility in arrangements is wise. In the past, other formats such as weekend workshops have been found successful; these could also be considered for future intensive course delivery, as could mixed formats, with part of a course delivered intensively and the remainder on a weekly basis, for example. Whatever format is chosen, it is important to maximise the opportunities for students to experience the positives that the Whyalla students have highlighted: the in-class interaction and atmosphere made possible by smaller classes and approachable, flexible lecturers; the formal and informal collaborative learning opportunities; and the little extras (such as ice-breaker activities and social gatherings) that help build a cohesive group in a short space of time.

In planning summer schools it would be advisable to liaise with library staff, including metropolitan line managers, to achieve possible changes in opening hours to maximise summer school participant access and use. A staff member has suggested having a brief library orientation session and holding some of the classes or discussion groups in the library so that students are more aware of what is available there to make use of during their non-class time. The issues for some students relating to child care should be considered; if any local possibilities exist, information about these should be readily available to students before they travel to summer school.

The Centre for Regional Engagement currently plans to continue offering courses at summer school, possibly adding to the range. The Statistics course is now presented in intensive format to the students at the Mount Gambier Regional Centre, where Business, Social Work and Nursing programmes are delivered by blended face-to-face, videoconferencing and online methods with both permanent and part-time staff employed at both Mount Gambier and Whyalla. One difference is that the September Statistics course is the only way offered for students in Mount Gambier to undertake that course, whereas Whyalla students have the option of taking it intensively or as a semester-long course; this may have equity implications. For any future building up of the summer school programme, a number of factors must be considered: availability of suitable accommodation, scheduling, workload issues and staff availability. The good publicity built up over the last decade must not be jeopardised by adding other courses that may not be run so well.

### **Further research**

Further research could involve metropolitan partners and compare the regional campus summer school learning environment with that of courses delivered in this mode at other campuses of the University, and attended by both regional and metropolitan students. Likewise, comparisons with other institutions' intensive course offerings could highlight issues and practices from which all research partners could learn.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Whyalla summer school initiative has been but one example of a small tertiary campus in a non-metropolitan region beginning something that has been taken up by larger campuses of the institution. It has also been a means of

introducing metropolitan students to a different style of course presentation and provided for interaction between metropolitan and regional students, including international students. Highlights have been the advantages of small classes, the support and access to approachable lecturers, and the development of cohesive groups in which collaborative learning can occur. These retrospective surveys have highlighted the positive experiences provided for diverse groups of students over more than a decade by these regional summer school course offerings.

## REFERENCES

- Ausubel, D. P. (2000). *Acquisition and Retention of Knowledge: A Cognitive View*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Bruffee, K. A. (1993). *Collaborative learning: higher education, interdependence and the authority of knowledge*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Conrad, L. (1990, July). Intensive learning in a higher education context. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Griffith University, Brisbane.
- Duke, C. (1972). University of Tasmania Geology I summer school. *Australian Journal of Adult Education*, 12(2), 67-71.
- Ellis, B., Sawyer, J. & Wilson, D. (2005). Summer school at a regional university campus: just completing a course, or a rich learning experience? In C. Boylan (Ed.), *Our Stories: Innovation and Excellence in Rural Education: Proceedings of 21st National Rural Education Conference, Darwin, 5-7 October, 2005* (pp. 59-71). Toowoomba, Queensland: Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia Inc.
- Inglis, R., Broadbent, A. & Dall'Alba, G. (1992). *Intensive Learning: Comparative Advantage for Accounting Education?* Melbourne: Department of Accountancy Working Papers, RMIT.
- Mason, R. & Morgan, A. (1986). *Rough and the Smooth – Students' Experiences of O.U. Study. Open-ended Feedback from the Student Opinion Survey*. Bletchley UK: Open University.
- Nicodemus, R. (1992). *Summer Schools: Individual and Institutional Learning*. Milton Keynes UK: Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University.
- Sanders, L. & Burton, J. D. (1996). From retention to satisfaction: new outcomes for assessing the freshman experience. *Research in Higher Education*, 37(5), 555-567.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the participants in this research for their willingness to share their thoughts about this regional summer school programme. We also wish to acknowledge Mr Digby Wilson, former law lecturer, whose initiative was responsible for the beginning of the Whyalla summer school programme, and who encouraged the undertaking of this research.



## APPENDIX: ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

### *Learning through an intensive course at Summer School*

Welcome to this survey concerning your participation and learning in Whyalla summer school courses. More details of the study are provided in the information statement attached to the e-mail message that included the link to the survey.

Some questions below logically allow only one answer. Others allow you to select more than one response; for example, you may have attended more than one Whyalla summer school course. Open-ended questions allow you to type in your response.

Submitting your survey will be taken as showing that you consent to participate in this study.

#### *Student profile*

1. Which Whyalla summer school courses have you attended?

*[on questionnaires following 2005 summer school]*

Introduction to Law	2005
Statistical Analysis for Business	2005

*[on questionnaires for students who attended Whyalla summer school courses in 2003 and/or 2004]*

Introduction to Law	2004
Statistical Analysis for Business	2004
Introduction to Law	2003
Statistical Analysis for Business	2003

2. I first enrolled for my current programme in ..... (year)
3. Had you previously attempted the course/s on a semester-long basis? Yes No  
*[options for each course offered]*
4. My usual campus is: Whyalla City West Other UniSA Other uni
5. My age is: under 25 25-34 35-44 45-54 55 or older
6. I am: female male

#### *Motivation*

1. My reasons (in order of importance) for studying this course at summer school were:
2. If this was your first summer school, would you attend another one? Yes No

#### *Teaching and Learning*

1. How did you find the intensive learning experience as compared with studying a course spread over a normal semester? (For example, were some things about it better than in a semester-long course? Were other things less favourable?)
2. What factors helped your learning at summer school?
3. Do you feel that you retain what you learned in summer school? Yes No

4. Did you subsequently enrol in a course for which the summer school course was a prerequisite?

Yes No

5. How do you rate the workload for the summer school course? (If you took more than one course this way, you may like to specify workload for each.)

6. Was the workload more or less manageable with the summer school mode of delivery?

*Studying at Whyalla Campus*

1. Did you stay at the Student Village?

Yes No

2. How did you find the campus as a place to study effectively?

3. How did the course fit in with other work commitments? (For example, did you need to take time off, or could you arrange to have your leave to fit in with the course?)

*Further comments*

1. Do you have any further comments on any aspect of your Whyalla summer school experience?

Many thanks for completing this questionnaire. Your comments are valued.